

**ORATION DELIVERED ON THE FIFTH
ANNIVERSARY OF THE SOUTH
CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, AT
HIBERNIAN HALL, IN CHARLESTON, ON
WEDNESDAY EVENING, MAY 23, 1860**

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Oration delivered on the fifth anniversary of the South Carolina Historical Society, at Hibernian Hall, in Charleston, on Wednesday evening, May 23, 1860 by Thomas M. Hanckel

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THOMAS M. HANCKEL

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ORATION.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN:

Although the human mind is an organism so nicely adjusted, that, I suppose, it would be impossible to deprive it of even the least of its powers without crippling the whole intellectual man, yet of all the faculties which compose its wonderful structure, I think there is no one so necessary to its healthful life, and its vigorous action, as the power of memory. And this not only because without any memory at all, the immediate and momentary perceptions of our senses would be the whole sum of human existence, and we would stand upon a narrow strip of life, speechless, thoughtless, and almost soulless, while each passing moment would draw behind us an impenetrable veil of oblivion, cutting us off from all knowledge of the past, and, in consequence, from all expectation of the future, and leaving us the miserable slaves of accident and the rudest mechanism of the senses; not only because without a vigorous memory, there could be no accurate perception of differences, and therefore no analysis, and no correct comparison of ideas, and no clear knowledge of their relations, and, therefore, no process of reasoning, and no swift deduction from premises to conclusions; not only because, under the system of philosophy taught by the inductive science of modern times, it is from the storehouse of a laborious experience, and a full and abundant memory, that we draw all that wealth of knowledge which is the magnificent endowment of our age; but because memory enters into the essential elements of our existence, and wields an influence over the life, the character, and the affections, which may not be so obvious, but is of incalculable importance. For, while it is from the memory

that we derive our knowledge of duration, it is through the memory also that our human life is grafted upon eternity, and by its vital power that this life progresses with the infinite. And as the highest evidence we possess of the soul's immaterial existence is, I think, to be found in the memory, and memory is, I believe, a true spiritual sense, corresponding to the senses of the body, and attests to our consciousness the presence of the ideal world, as fully and as truly as do the bodily senses attest the existence of the world of matter, so it is memory which defines our individuality, and determines our identity, and is the native region and the genial atmosphere of our ideal and spiritual life. Memory is also the source of all moral responsibility, and a necessary element of all moral character, and the foundation of all our bodily and mental habits; and with the loss of memory, the soul would lose its sense of accountability, and its appreciation of moral beauty, the mind would lose all its habits of perception and thought, the tongue would cleave to the roof of the mouth, and the right hand would forget its cunning.

But in nothing is the power of memory displayed in a higher degree than in its control over the affections—the highest and the noblest portion of our nature. Nothing which is not long remembered affects us deeply. For that which is easily forgotten is never incorporated with our inner life, and is never grasped by our sympathies, and the fleeting smiles and tears of childhood's brief memories are a proverb. That, therefore, is a false and shallow philosophy, which exclaims, "Let the dead past bury its dead." How can that be called a dead past, which is quick with the vitality of our spiritual life, and with the strength of our individual natures and affections, which determines our identity, and defines our individuality, and by whose fruitful power memories have formed themselves into habits, and habits have become consolidated into character. This engrossing devotion to the present may, indeed, bring a flushing of the blood and an energy of the nerves, resulting in a restless activity. But if actions which go freighted with thought and an earnest purpose, find a surer haven and bring a larger blessing, and words, and thoughts, and deeds, spoken and done with fitness, like seeds sown in their native soil and in a genial season, yield a larger and a better harvest, then may we well look to the past for its lessons and its guidance.

And what thoughtful and earnest man would forget or neglect

the past? Who would forget his pure, and peaceful, and happy hours, and all the glory of his life? He would as soon close his eyes to the glad sunshine and rejoicing nature. Who has not known the griefs and the desolations of life? Who has not felt, with Tennyson at the sea-washed grave of his friend,

"And the stately ships go on
To their haven under the bill;
But oh, for the touch of a vanished hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still.

Break, break, break,
At the foot of thy crags, oh sea!
But the tender grace of a day that is dead
Can never come back to me."

Yet who would forget his sorrows? For our sorrows flow from our affections; and our affections are our noblest and most precious life, and as dear as life itself. And we would as soon destroy our bodies, because they are the sources of pain as well as of pleasure, as commit the spiritual suicide of forgetfulness. Who does not feel that his griefs have linked him with the ideal and the immortal? Who will not say with the poet,

"Ah! sweeter to be drunk with loss,
To dance with death, to beat the ground,
Than that the victor Hours should scorn
The long result of love, and boast,
'Behold the man who loved and lost,
But all he was is overworn.'"

Who would forget his errors and his follies, his humiliating errors and his sad mistakes, if he remembers them with a brave spirit and an intelligent purpose? Who would forget them, unless he is willing to forfeit the moral endowments of his nature, and forget that he is a responsible being, capable of appreciating what is noble, and pure, and holy? What lessons may they not teach us—lessons of humility, lessons of caution, lessons of mercy, lessons of an abiding faith in the inflexible laws of life, and the moral government of heaven.

Indeed, so great and inestimable is the power of memory, and so close and intimate the connection between the past and the present, that I think there can be no healthful or valuable development of our mental and moral nature and activity, which is not the logical sequence of the past; in which the offices of life are not assumed with a due regard to the training of

the past, in which the duties of life are not performed with a just consideration of the relations of the past, where a great benefit does not receive an overflowing measure of gratitude, and a great wrong is not followed by a great repentance and a great conquest over evil, and so on through all the expressions of our nature.

And the great and crowning work of the Christian faith has been this: that it has enabled sorrowful, erring, and guilty men to face the past; to face it, indeed, with bowed heads and stricken hearts, but still to face the irrevocable past, with the light of its truths interpreting its lessons, with its offers of pardon dispelling its gloom, with its supernatural strength giving life and energy to the present, and with its wonderful promises controlling the future.

Memory then, is, indeed, that golden bowl which gathers the precious drops of life, and which carries and preserves forever, the essential qualities of our intellectual and moral character. It is, indeed, that silver cord, as slight as fancy, but as bright as thought, and as strong as life, which, beginning with the first look of love which the nursing infant lifts to its mother's face, entwines itself with the whole growth of existence and the progress of time, binding together thought with thought, feeling with feeling, action with action, in the indestructible unity of an individual life, in the complete development of an individual nature, in the inextricable responsibility of an individual character, until, to human eyes, it is lost in the grave, and "the silver cord is loosed and the golden bowl is broken," and the spirit returns to its Maker.

And what memory is to the individual, history is to a nation. That a people should have any history at all, that there should be acts and events, passions and agitations, social interests and political powers, which reach, in their influence and effects, to the limits of a certain country, and there sharply cease, powerfully affecting this people, yet touching no other, is the highest evidence they can have of their national existence. And it is equally true, that a people without a history—without any record of their civil organization and political action, whether this record be in oral traditions, or in written documents—cannot be said to have any national life whatever. They would represent but a noisy, thoughtless and aimless rabble, or at best, a fluctuating and capricious band of savages; for the

bond of all society is sympathy. And the thoughts and the feelings of men live in their actions more than in language itself—more than in anything else. United action becomes, therefore, the highest source of sympathy. And the history of a people is both the record and the evidence of their united action, and, therefore, the true representative of their national life. The construction of society and government is not a work of human choice and wisdom, but is the result of historical necessity. And the people who should lose their history, would either soon lapse into barbarism, or soon submit to a conqueror. Or, should they willfully forget or destroy their history, they must pass through a great political and social convulsion before beginning again to build the fabric of their national life and strength.

The strength of Roman greatness was sapped when the men of Rome began to forget the story of her power, her wisdom, and her glory, and the Roman nation perished when Roman history was ended, and her barbarous conquerors thronged the Forum and crowded the banks of Tiber, with a race who knew nothing of her heroic legends, and had never heard of her Consuls, her Tribunes, her Senate, her great Republic, and her mighty Cæsars. New and great nations were to spring from the loins of the invaders, but though her people and her seven hills still remained, old Rome was dead forever. And when the people of France, fiercely desperate, and drunk with excess of philosophical liberty, madly demolished in a day the work of centuries, tore down the throne of Henry IV, and Louis XIV, obliterated all the land-marks of their social and political history, and launched the State upon a treacherous sea of constitutional theories and political experiments, France lay faint with weakness, and gasping in the convulsive struggles of a mortal agony, until her First Consul, gathering in his hand the broken powers of the State, led her through a new history of bloody conquest, martial fame, and national power and glory, and, as the Great Napoleon, established his imperial dynasty. And to this dynasty the France of our day, after other experiments, and other failures, has again turned for refuge as to the only representative of history she has left, for the ancient history she can never recall.

As memory, therefore, is to the individual a true witness of his spiritual existence, so is history the true witness of a na-

tional life. It is a witness to whose testimony we must carefully listen, if we would understand not only the origin of a people, but the development of their national character, and the sources of their national institutions. For, it would be strange, indeed, if history, which laid the foundation, should take no part in raising the superstructure.

I have endeavored, on a former occasion, to show that all government is based upon individual power, and that nature, society and history are the great sources of power. If we examine the records of history, we will, I think, discover endless illustrations of its truth; and will find, in the striking language of Paschal, that "if the nose of Cleopatra had been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed." But we must never forget that, as two great contending hosts are hung in space, waging a deadly warfare, whose conflicts are told in the sublime music of Milton's glorious epic, or in the still more awful words of inspired Scripture, so among men two great classes contend for the mastery in society—the defenders of wholesome law, and the champions of selfish and unbridled license. And as the powers of evil present themselves in the brawny muscles, the fierce passions, and the hoarse clamors of depraved, selfish and ignorant men, so they can only be successfully encountered by the courage, the strength, the intelligence, and the energy of individual men—by the simple and the positive power of an actual presence. It is between these two contending forces that the moral law interposes, and by the instinctive awe of its presence, by its appeal to the reason, and by its control over the conscience, throws the weight of its authority and its strength into the scale of right, and assures a triumph to the advocates of truth and justice. Now, this office and power of the moral law is represented by institutions. And history is the source and evidence of custom; and custom is the strength of institutions. When the renowned John Selden was asked on what principle and maxim of the English Constitution did he rest the right to resist tyranny, "on the immemorial custom of Englishmen," was the reply. In this brief and pithy answer, he not only announced a fundamental maxim of the constitutional law of England, but a great principle of all constitutional history. For the authority of custom is of universal application, whether it is reduced to the form of written